

Breakaway to France, by Steve Bradwell

Steve's account of his adventurous trip across the Channel to Cherbourg and back in his Westerly NIMROD, Breakaway. (All photographs by the author.)

Something had been gnawing away at me. I owned *Breakaway*, a Westerly Nimrod trailer sailer and had been gradually adding to its equipment to the point where I felt I had a pretty seaworthy boat. And yet apart from a week cruising North Norfolk with Len I had not really used it for anything I could not have done equally well in my cruising Enterprise dinghy.

For me an open boat is the most rewarding way to enjoy DCA rallies in the South East, which is where I choose to do most of my sailing. So why had I bought the Nimrod in the first place?

I think it was the slightly irrational appeal, given my preferred type of sailing, of a dry cosy cabin, a boat in which I could have a bookshelf and where my bed was laid out ready to stretch out the moment my anchor touched the mud. I also had in mind a more seaworthy boat in which I could make some longer voyages. Trouble was I hadn't made any. Luckily I can enjoy the ownership of my Nimrod, sitting as it does on its trailer on my drive, without having to think about running costs, which are not much more than the dinghy.

Still, I had the urge to make a longer trip and a Channel crossing to Cherbourg had formed in my mind. Cherbourg was a challenging distance. It would be safe to enter in all weathers and had the shore facilities I knew I would need, which were fuel and shore power to recharge the two batteries which power the fixed DSC radio, GPS, depth meter, nav light and tiller pilot. I knew the tiller pilot would get a lot of use of because I wanted to make the crossing single-handed, the way I do 95% of my sailing.

Safety gear carried included flares, auto lifejacket, buoyancy aid, lifebuoy, lifeline, drogue, storm jib and the usual furling/reefing arrangements, two good anchors and a 3.5hp outboard with 25 litres of spare

fuel. Nimrods have built-in buoyancy, although how effective that would be on a forty year-old boat loaded with heavy cruising gear I'm not sure. I registered *Breakaway* on Coast Guard form CG66 on the internet.

I had twelve days' leave from work and planned to put to sea only if the wind was in a favourable direction. The challenge would be to maintain watch on the long crossing. Tacking or motoring into the wind was out.

When I finished work on Tuesday it looked good for a Thursday crossing, with winds up to F5 from the northeast. After launching at Northney Marina on Wednesday afternoon I sailed south, intending to anchor near the mouth of the harbour in order to rest before making an early start. But with a light northerly wind I carried on to Whitecliff Bay on the southeast side of the Isle of Wight.

Up at 0330h, I was sailing South by 0400h. It was the start of a 65-mile crossing which would take 19hrs and become a bit of an ordeal.

Progress was steady sailing dead downwind with the jib poled out or rolled away and I got into a routine of hourly GPS fixes and updates to mark progress on the chart. Steering was mostly left to the tiller pilot, which kept a better course than I could. There were very few other vessels visible and at times none at all for hours at a time. Even in the shipping lanes the closest ships were several miles away. I got into the habit of keeping my lifeline clipped on as much as possible.

Around the halfway point the wind dropped and speed fell below 4 knots. I kept sailing for longer than I should but eventually I had to run the motor. The motion of the boat was uncomfortable, which eventually caused me to become seasick for a while. This and the noise and vibration from the outboard made for a miserable few hours.



Longis Bay, Alderney



It became clear from my S-shaped chart plot, as the tide swept me east then west, that my reduced average speed was going to leave me east of Cherbourg at the onset of the eastbound tide. The last few miles were frustratingly slow and added about 2 hours to the journey that perhaps I could have avoided.

With the wind returned and the light gone I sailed into Cherbourg at 2300h UK time. Despite having a detailed chart on my lap the position of the Marina did not stand out and I followed the wrong red beacon into a desolate commercial area. Retracing my path I located the marina. Being late and not being in my element in a marina, I decided to use the charted anchorage just outside it.

With sails down I motored into position and lowered my fishermans anchor. The unattended motor cut out and I watched in frustration as the dragging anchor allowed the boat to drift dangerously close to the rocks of the marina breakwater. This happened twice more before I gave up and motored onto the nearest pontoon inside the marina. The stress of all this was made worse by the tendency of the ancient air-cooled Mariner to stall at tickover then resist restarting when hot, due to fuel evaporation.

Safely on the pontoon and able to see what I was doing. I examined the anchor, which was dangling from the bow. It was wrapped in a huge ball of what looked like an old raincoat but on closer inspection turned out to be very large-leafed seaweed.

Things got better after this. Cherbourg turned out to be a good place to be. Once in the visitors' pontoons I was among mainly UK

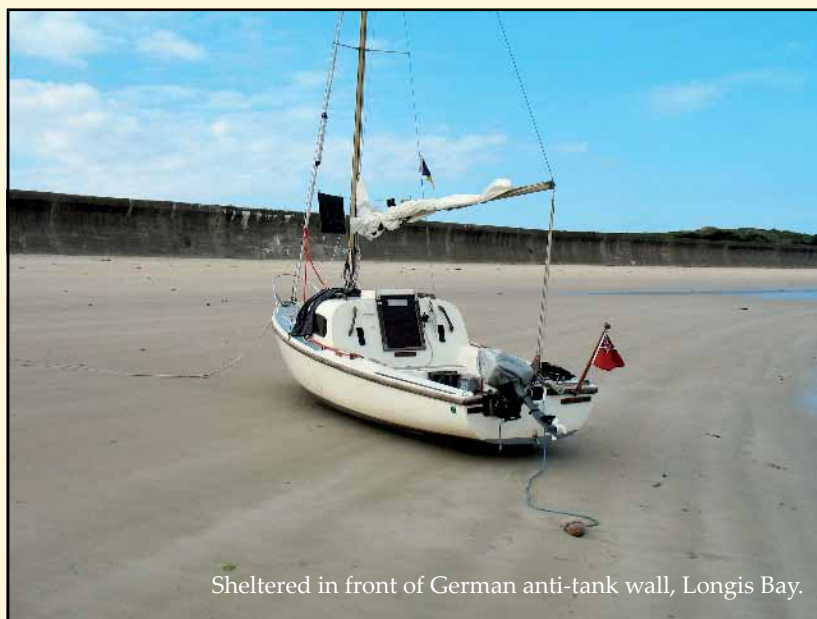
sailors and in particular Nicholson 32 owners who were having a rally. Their long deep-keeled ocean-going boats were in extreme contrast to my trailer sailer, which was easily the smallest boat on the visitors' pontoons. I had a bit of a Frank Dye moment (not really) when a Norwegian yachtsman came over for a chat and told me that the whole marina thought I was a madman for sailing over in such a small boat.

It was good value at ten Euros per night and with friendly marina staff and great places to eat Cherbourg has lots to offer and I enjoyed my stay. But after three nights it was time to move on. The wind was still from the northeast so a trip to Alderney looked possible.

The main concern was the very strong tides, so I followed the advice in Reeds and used the inshore back eddy to cheat the tide in order to arrive at the headland of Cap de la Hague at slack tide. I may not have got the timing just right because I encountered impressively steep waves at that location which tested my confidence in my standing rigging as *Breakaway* crashed down off the top of each wave.

It had been raining for some time, but as I sailed west from the coast of France the weather closed in. I had set a GPS waypoint a safe distance north of Alderney with the idea of dropping down to Braye harbour. Along with a compass bearing I followed my route into the gloom. With no sight of land I instinctively steered towards where I knew Alderney must be, instead of holding a course to the north.

My mistake was clear when, with less than three miles from my waypoint, land appeared in front of me. It was an intimidating sight. An unlit lighthouse surrounded by jagged rocks over which crashing



Sheltered in front of German anti-tank wall, Longis Bay.



waves were breaking. I altered course to the north but was alarmed to see my speed drop to nothing. It was clear the tide was going to sweep us along the south side of the island.

I had added GPS waypoints for all the charted anchorages around Alderney. I thought my best bet would be one called Tchue Bay. This should be sheltered from the prevailing wind. The GPS indicated that this bay was one mile southwest of my position. I turned *Breakaway* around and headed for the bay. There was an old fort built onto the rocks. As I passed it a sheltered bay appeared. It was not Tchue Bay but I knew there was another anchorage before Tchue, so this must be it. I was attracted to it because beyond the jagged rocks at its mouth there was a sandy beach on which several boats were beached.

There was no time to check the chart, as I would be swept past by the very strong tide. I pulled down the outboard. It started second pull and I gunned it towards the gap in the rocks. It was a great relief to feel my boat break free of the current and enter the still water of the bay. This was Longie Bay and by luck I had found an ideal landing place.

That evening I walked across to Braye harbour for a pint in the pub I had last visited twenty years before as part of the crew of another sailing boat. Braye does have a sandy beach, but landing has to be arranged with the harbour master. The visitors' swinging mooring looked uncomfortable in the swell, which was running in. Most of the charted anchorages are surrounded by cliffs and offer no access to land.

The following day was spent walking round the island, which can be done in a day. There were a number of German concentration camps on Alderney, traces of which can still be seen, along with

numerous bunkers and forts, most in good condition and waiting to be explored.

Back at the boat I checked the weather on my laptop plus 'dongle'. Just as I hoped, the wind was changing to the west and with a favourable tide at 0900h I turned in for an early night. Next day, Tuesday 7th June, I motored out of the bay at 0830h and set sail for Bembridge.

A broad reach in F4-5 gave fantastic and fast sailing and the tiller pilot was unused for long periods as I hogged the helm. By 1700h I was 15 miles south of the Isle Of Wight but the tide had turned and progress slowed. Wind gradually rose to around F6, and with wind against tide it was also pretty rough with large

waves, and occasional breaking tops. I had reefed the main once and struggled to remove the first batten in order to put in a second (roller reefing), but steering was becoming heavy and difficult. Reluctantly I made my way over the side deck to the mast to take down the main, clipping my lifeline around the mast. It was not easy but with the main stowed and the 'storm jib' unfurled the boat handling was transformed and I made steady progress around the south side of the Isle Of Wight. By 2345h I was safely anchored in Priory Bay, Bembridge. Distance run: 82 miles.

Next day I was forced to remain at Bembridge as the F7 wind would have made entering Chichester harbour dangerous but winds were lighter on Thursday 9th and I had another fantastic sail back to Northney.

There were times during the trip when I doubted whether this kind of offshore sailing was for me, but looking back it had been a challenging, rewarding and memorable experience. Maybe I would make a similar trip in the future. But not for a while. The Nimrod was as good as I knew it would be. **SB**



Sailing home, mid-Channel